

Why do Our Children Need to learn English at Elementary Schools? A Critical Review on the provision of English to the Indonesia Elementary Schools

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It was in 1994 that the government started giving permission to elementary schools to introduce English as a subject. It has been 18 years since then. The policy, however, was only understood as the writer puts it, “not prohibiting” English to be taught in the elementary level of the children’s education. While the compulsory position is in the junior and senior high school levels up. English is also known as the local content subject which is not nationally tested and the curriculum of which is only provided for the fourth up to the sixth grade, from the first to the third, no national curriculum is available.

Although it has been 18 years, the result of the teaching and learning has not been satisfactory nationally as shown by some research studies, even saddening those who are concerned with elementary education, Some even lose hope than give it up and come to the decision that it is in vain to make our children learn English in the elementary schools due to the constraints which seem to be too complicated to deal with. If they hold decision making positions, it will not be too difficult to understand when they decide not to support the English provision in the elementary levels. This paper presents the reasons why we still need to take the stance that our children should learn English in the elementary schools.

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Introduction

It was in 1994 that the government started giving permission to elementary schools to introduce English as a subject. It has been 18 years since then. The policy, however, was only understood as the writer puts it, “not prohibiting” English to be taught in the elementary level of the children’s education. While the compulsory position is in the junior and senior high school levels up. English is also known as the local content subject which is not nationally tested and the curriculum of which is only provided for the fourth up to the sixth grade, from the first to the third, no national curriculum is available.

In the beginning years of the implementation of the policy, only some provinces provided some curricula which were locally made and were different from one another. Some were theme based, others were topic based. However, there had not yet been a nationally developed curriculum for all elementary schools which was badly needed for the newly introduced subject. In the early years teachers and those involved in the English provision need some guideline from experts on the teaching of English

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The Indonesian elementary schoolchildren

1. The number of elementary schoolchildren and the schools are as follow (<http://nisn.jardiknas.org/cont/data.statistik/index.php>)
- 2.

Number of		Number of children
Public school	141.089	22.078.400
Private school	36.896	4.699.917
		26.578.317

When we talk about elementary schoolchildren we refer to any children in Indonesia, the number of whom is very huge as the above table presents. It means that the policy of introducing English to the elementary schools will affect a great number of people. They are the parents, the parties responsible for the primary education, the society, the universities, the teacher training colleges. In the business side, there are book writers, media producers, publishers which so far have enjoyed the effect of the policy.

The characteristics of the Indonesian elementary schoolchildren

1. Most of them live in less geographically advantaged areas where education facilities in the form of human resources (teachers and officials), access to media and progress are not readily available. They live in every village, sub district, district, regency and province all over the country which is still struggling with the equity of opportunities in having access to education. Some who live in the remote places, no matter how wealthy their parents are, access to education could not be as easy to get as for those living in the cities. While those who live in the cities whose parents do not come from middle or high economic background still have difficult access to the quality education.

2. Due to the fact that elementary schools are of the lowest level of education, elementary schoolchildren in Indonesia generally reflect the real lives of the society. If they live in areas where the people have high standard of living, the schoolchildren that we find will be healthy, happy and well taken care of. On the other hand, when the schools are in the less economically, socially or geographically disadvantaged areas, elementary schoolchildren who we find will be those looking hungry or unhealthy.
3. Since 2001 it as when provincial autonomy was launched elementary schools in Indonesia has been under the local government. It implies that the better the local government the better the lives of the elementary schoolchildren are. Equipped with better teachers and better facilities as well as better management, schools in more privileged areas will certainly provide better service and better schooling to the children. In other words, children in elementary schools portray the condition of the areas
4. Education in the lowest level and in the youngest age naturally carry with them the home or domestic problems which influence the children's condition in every way especially in their learning situation. Children with domestic problems generally will also have the learning problems which teachers should take into account in order to have the best possible potential for success in their teaching. In other words children in our elementary schools generally have learning problems in schools which correlate with their home conditions.
5. The children do not have the option whether to learn English or not. Their parents, most often are as helpless as their children, cannot do anything about it. What they have to learn or not to learn are decided by the authority whether national or local. Schools individually are not free either to provide or not provide English to the children as a local content subject. The decision is made by the local authority in the education office. Whether or not the children learn English will be decided by those who will not see the school as individuals.

Reasons for providing English in the elementary schools

There is a need to survey in how educational systems in other countries formulate the objectives, aims or expectation in the English provision in the elementary schools. Looking at experiences from other countries definitely will be useful to have the best possible success in its implementation.

Aims and expectations why English provision in Elementary schools is popular in the world

1. The widespread assumption that the younger the child learn a new language the better the result will be
2. The fact that economic globalization has pushed the demand of English in the form of the workforce who speak English to meet the need of the international economic forces
3. The parents' enthusiasm for their children to learn English early in order to have social and economical benefit in the national context

The focus of our discussion is then the children with the above characteristics, the number of which is great and the future of this country may depend on what they will be in twenty five years of time. We do not talk about some children who do not have the characteristics previously elaborated. Some literatures on English for young learners in Indonesia propose the topic of children born in the more economically and socially advantaged families. They do not share the characteristics with the children as the focus of our discussion. The number is too small to be taken into account compared to the number of the children we have been referring to. We do not talk about children whose parents could afford to have the options whether to have them learn foreign languages or not. Therefore, our main focus in discussing is why Indonesian children in elementary schools the number of whose may reach more than 10% percent then the total population. As the title of paper suggest, reasons why the children need to learn English are proposed.

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Pinter (2006) suggest differently formulated reasons

1. Develop children's basic communication abilities in English
2. Encourage enjoyment and motivation
3. Promote learning about other cultures
4. Develop children's cognitive skills
5. Develop children linguistic awareness
6. Encourage learning to learn

To give more ideas about the reasons of the English provision in the elementary schools we can have a look at the report in the Vietnamese English provision in the elementary schools organized by the British Council in 2007.

1. Preparing the children for later English learning in the secondary schools or for laying foundation for further English learning
2. Promoting international cooperation by using English as an international language
3. Believing that younger is better in learning and thinking that learning a language in the young ages is easier
4. Believing that learning English will assist the children in learning other subjects
5. Being aware that children naturally like English
6. Believing that if the children start learning English earlier, this will lead to the better level of their mastery

7. Believing that English mastery for their children will give later job prospects
8. Believing that children have the right to learn another language
9. There is always the need to follow the trend
10. The most recent ways in teaching English in the elementary level today are in line with the the education reform in the level

When starting the English provision, The French government formulated the aims in the following way; *to prepare children linguistically psychologically and culturally for language learning* (Brewster, 2004). The aim sounds simple but it is not easy to interpret. It is very clear that the aim is not on the product but in the process.

The reasons why the children need to keep learning English in the elementary schools

1. Other children in other countries in the world start learning English in the elementary schools

As reported by the British Council in collaboration with University of Aston (2011), there are 144 countries from all the continents the education systems of which include English as a school subject in elementary schools. Elementary schoolchildren in Hungary, Poland and Spain as the representatives of European countries learn English in schools. Would be more likely to compare our elementary schoolchildren with those in Asia. All countries in Asia, from Japan to India, children learn English in the elementary school. To be more specific, in the South East Asian countries, all countries offer English in the elementary level. Things of course are not similar from country to country; however. We only need the information that children in other countries in the world learn English in the elementary schools so that we can also say why the Indonesian children cannot and do not do the same thing. If they are not introduced to English as early as their other fellow children in the world they will be left behind. They will not know English as well as other children in the world when they grow up.

2. The children's learning time in schools increases due to several factors.
Children today start school earlier than children in the old days. The reasons vary, some parents send their children at very young ages because they want their children to have more systematic education from the very beginning of their childhood. In the past Indonesian children only started having their school at the age of six or seven. Today, however, children have to start schooling at the age of four or even three due to the fact that their parents have to leave them to work. In the past children of those ages might stay at home with their extended families. Today, when parents are no longer backed up by the extended families and getting help for the babysitting is not as easily as it used to be. Therefore, they tend to send the children earlier to the schooling system. That will make the children have earlier and longer systematic learning They need more things to learn. Traditionally, educating children in some societies may cover music, sports, dances, craft, and religious teachings. Today, foreign languages need to be added, so naturally, English will be there to be chosen.

3. The demand of the society to the children is getting higher and higher each day. Even though the children and the parents do not want to put much pressure on them, they could not afford to be just ordinary school leavers. It is due to the fact that they have to compete with other fellow school leavers. Therefore, they need to equip themselves with things they need to be successful in the job market. They need to have knowledge and skills in information technology, entrepreneurships, communication, arts, music which, if not learned in school, are learned when the children are still in schools. When they leave secondary schools, parents and society expect that they have with them more than just mastery of all the subjects offered in schools. English is one of the knowledge and skills required by the school leavers which will make them ready for other challenges for their future.
4. The computer age has spoilt teachers of young learners of English with such an easy and wonderful access to information on how to teach children whether individually at home or in the school system. Children can also have thousand ways of learning English as long as they are interested and want it. Plenty of most interactive media and endless wonderful resources can be downloaded from the internet. Without the instrumental need to learn, our children would not see the need to learn English. When they learn English at school, the door will open to them so that they can walk in on their own and learn further.
5. If the children in the elementary schools, the number of whose is so great are no longer to learn English at schools, most of them will never meet English during their elementary school time. Some might continue learning English in courses or in other ways, but the number will not significantly count if compared to those who will stop learning. This will put a great number of teachers out of jobs, Moreover, book writers and publishers will no longer work on the business of English coursebooks for elementary schools which has been good these years. In the era of computers, program designers will not have their interactive language programmes for children easily sold.

Conclusion

The policy of introducing English to our elementary school children has been a wise thought although there are numerous constraints and difficulties we constantly face. We need to keep moving with our efforts. And we are not alone, other countries have experienced the same things and some have solved the problems and have been successful with the policy. What we need to do is to keep learning from many sources so that we will understand the nature of our problems. Another important thing to do to convince the policy makers is that the policy should not be terminated.

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